

# ~ Life in LAMORINDA ~

## Local bee expert writes enticing children's book



Photo provided

Local author and bee expert Melissa Edwards at a recent celebration of animals at the UC Botanical Garden, working with bees from the Mount Diablo Beekeepers Association

### By Diane Claytor

You won't find beehives, hive stands, honey extractors, veils or any beekeeper accessory in Melissa Edwards' Lafayette backyard. That's because Edwards, a talented landscape architect and self-taught bee expert, does not raise bees. But she is passionate about them and protecting them from extinction.

"People don't realize how important bees are in our daily lives," Edwards declares. "Without bees, we wouldn't have fruits or vegetables; there'd be no pumpkins, no cotton, no nuts." As she explains, bees pollinate flowers, bringing pollen from one flower to another. That, in turn, produces nuts or seeds that then grow into fruits and vegetables. "Literally," she continues, "if we didn't have bees we wouldn't have peaches or pears. We wouldn't have chocolate because the cacao bean is pollinated by bees."

Edwards hasn't always been a bee aficionado, although she has always been a nature lover and prides herself on being knowledgeable on what nature provides. Her desire to learn more about bees came 15 years ago when, as a landscape architect and mom

with two boys at Lafayette's Springhill Elementary School, she became deeply involved in developing and designing the school's outdoor classroom, which, she proudly says, really engages kids. "Studies have shown that when children are outside, they actually focus better," Edwards reports. While working on this project, she began researching all the elements of outdoor classrooms, including bees and their significance to so many things we don't even think about.

She learned so much that she, like most people, didn't know: there are over 20,000 native bee species in the world, 4,000 in the U.S., 1,600 in California and 79 whose native habitat is the East Bay; she also came to understand that the majority of people have a difficult time differentiating most bees from other flying insects.

As she was discovering new facts about bees and working on the outdoor classroom, Edwards created an interactive game geared to children: "Am I a Bee?" which had pictures of different insects and kids would be asked to decide which insect was actually one of the many species of bees. "The kids really loved it," Edwards recalls. She then had the idea of writing a children's

book, carrying over that fun learning experience.

Unfortunately, the book was put on hold as Edwards and her family relocated to Korea and then Singapore for her husband's job. Once back in Lafayette, she was able to return to her writing, resulting in "Can You See If I'm a Bee?" published last year.

Written in rhyme with colorful drawings by wildlife illustrator, Jonathan Woodward, the book describes what bees do and why they are important. Reviewers have said it's "beautifully written and illustrated," "a wonderful book for teaching kids about native bees," and "Ms. Edwards manages to make bee science fun while also being informative."

"What is a bee? Let's find out why they are so important to you and me!" the engaging book begins. "Pollen sticks to their hairy legs. Or sometimes their bellies – and even their heads," Edwards writes. She goes on to rhythmically describe a variety of bees, including the honeybee, bumblebee, mason bee and green sweat bee. "I'm a green sweat bee – what a strange name! I'm smaller than a honeybee and I'm also quite tame."

The book ends with a detailed appendix, geared to parents and teachers who can then share more information about the insects they have been reading about.

Edwards moved to Asia before Springhill's outdoor classroom was constructed. Her design included different elements and areas for kids, including a vegetable and herb garden, greenhouse, worm bins and, of course, plants that attract bees. She was extremely pleased when she visited recently and saw that most of her design and layout had been implemented. She's been told that the garden has been wonderful for the students.

Edwards still works as a landscape architect, doing mostly consultations for resi-

dential gardens. She lives half-time in Lafayette and the other half in Florida and has clients in both locations. She admits to encouraging her clients to install native plants, particularly in California because of our drought conditions. She also promotes building more outdoor classrooms and always encourages installing bee-friendly plants.

She continues to write children's books, all in rhyme but still in draft form, with en-

ting titles such as "The Little Bird Who Never Said a Word," "What Could It Be Under the Sea?" "What If the Sun Were Made of Pizza?" and "The Crabby Tabby." Her hope is to get these books published soon.

"Can You See If I'm a Bee?" is available on both Amazon and Barnes and Noble websites, as well as through Edwards' own site, melissagedwards.com.

## Saint Mary's College music program features three festive concerts in December

Submitted by Ben Enos

The Saint Mary's College Music Program will wrap up the fall semester with several days of concerts from Dec. 1-4. Performances begin on Dec. 1 and Dec. 3 at 8 p.m. with the "One True Joy" Choir Concert in the SMC Chapel. This concert will feature Glee, Chamber and Jazz Singers and will share beloved classics by Lassus, Byrd, and Dello Joio and lesser known but fabulous pieces by Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, Carlos Chavéz, Buddy Johnson, Billie Holiday, André Thomas, and Zanaida Robles.

The not-to-be missed concert will also showcase Zoe McCray's new arrangement of Beyoncé's "Pretty Hurts," holiday carol-singing, and soul-stirring jazz and sacred works by Bay Area composer, Greg Murai. Admission is free, but contributions are welcome to support the Choir.

On Friday, Dec. 2 at 7:30 p.m., the Chamber Players and

Concert Ensemble feature Ennio Marricone's "The Good the Bad and the Ugly," Astor Piazzola's "Oblivion," and original compositions and arrangements by Saint Mary's Music Faculty member Sam Reider at LeFevre Theatre. Ticket information is available via the SMC Performing Arts website (www.stmarys-ca.edu/music-concerts-Dec22).

Finally, on Sunday, Dec. 4 at 4 p.m. the Jazz Band will share its holiday spirit with a concert in LeFevre Theatre. It will feature a selection of jazz classics and then beloved holiday music by Bobby Timmons, José Feliciano, Irving Berlin, Billy Strayhorn, Mariah Carey and more. Ticket information for the show is also available via the SMC Performing Arts website.

Tickets: \$15 General Admission, \$8 for SMC Students, \$12 Staff/Faculty/ Non-SMC Students. Online sales only. For help with order or for more info, please contact Tara Sundy at (925) 631-4670 or tms8@stmarys-ca.edu.